

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 34/070/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 287
18 December 2003

Embargo Date: 18 December 2003 00:01 GMT

Guatemala: Time to end the backlash against human rights

The killing of Father José María Ruiz Furlán last Sunday is just one of many examples that illustrate the magnitude and urgency of the human rights challenges facing the new administration next year, Amnesty International said on the eve of the final round of presidential elections, taking place next December 28th.

Respect for human rights has taken a step backwards during the presidency of President Alfonso Portillo and impunity still remains a pattern in the country.

The 1996 Peace Accords and the recommendations of the Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), Historical Clarification Commission, must be incorporated into the new government's political program. By doing so the new Guatemalan president will have a unique opportunity to break with a history of impunity and human rights violations that have overshadowed Guatemala for over 30 years and made the country a "safe haven" for human rights violators." Amnesty International stressed.

Amongst the priorities for the new government should be the strengthening of the justice system through the establishment of the Comisión para la Investigación de Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad (Commission for the Investigation of Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Security Apparatus - CICIACS). This Commission will be mandated to investigate Guatemala's parallel power structures and the illegal activities and abuses they have carried out, thus ensuring the prosecution of individuals implicated in human rights violations.

Additionally, the new government must ensure that reforms to the intelligence services are implemented through the newly-established civilian agency, the Secretaría de Asuntos Administrativos y Seguridad de la Presidencia (SAAS), Secretariat of Administrative Affairs and Security, in such a way that civilian control is consolidated.

During 2003, political violence showed a disturbing pattern reminiscent of the repression of Guatemala's bloody and brutal past. Systematic acts of intimidation, death threats and extra judicial executions against political activists, members of the judiciary, witnesses of human rights violations, lawyers, journalists and human rights defenders were widespread, and impunity remained the norm in most of the cases. Furthermore, dozens of human rights defenders were forced into hiding and exile throughout the year.

"As the elections approach, it will be essential for both presidential candidates to take all possible

steps to ensure adherence to the non-violence pact signed by all parties at the start of the election campaign.", Amnesty International said.

" 2004 should mark a crucial turning point for Guatemala. The new President must take on the challenge and responsibility of implementing a constructive human rights program for the future to combat impunity and ensure a return to full respect for the rule of law ", Amnesty International concluded.

Background information

Father Ruiz was attacked and killed on 14 December by four armed men after he left the church of Santo Cura de Ars, in his parish of La Limonada, in a poor neighbourhood of Guatemala City. During the assault, he was repeatedly shot in the head.

His killing has been widely condemned by church leaders, human rights groups and members of civil society.

For more information on the human rights backlash in Guatemala, please see:

Guatemala: Amnesty International questions transfer of intelligence archives:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr340692003>

Guatemala: Political violence and human rights violations feared:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr340662003>

Guatemala: The end of the EMP should mean genuine reform, not just reshuffling:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr340652003>

Guatemala: Legitimacy on the line: human rights and the 2003 elections:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr340552003>

Guatemala: Ballots or Bullets? Political violence must be addressed:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr340372003>

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